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ABSTRACT

Data collected from 19 state education agencies through questionnaires and interviews focused on special problems and approaches in rural areas for complying with four major aspects of P.L. 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act: individualized education programs (IEPs), least restrictive environment (LRE), procedural safeguards, and parental participation. Cultural, geographic, climatic, socioeconomic, and other inhibiting factors were analyzed. Three primary inhibiting factors were identified in rural schools: teacher retention and recruitment problems, rural attitudinal problems, and problems based on rural geography. Problems were found to emanate from tradition bound rural environments and to be exacerbated by geographic and climatic demands of remote, isolated areas. (Author/CL)

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NATIONAL RESEARCH IDENTIFYING PROBLEMS IN IMPLEMENTING COMPREHENSIVE SPECIAL EDUCATION PROGRAMMING IN RURAL AREAS

Summary of Final Project Report of
a 1978-1979 Special Project

funded by:
Bureau of Education for the Handicapped
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ABSTRACT

This article reports data collected for the National Rural Research Project, funded by the Bureau of Education for the Handicapped to nationally investigate problems in implementing comprehensive special education programming. Cultural, geographic, climatic, socioeconomic and other inhibiting factors were analyzed as they related to implementation of PL 94-142, the Education of All Handicapped Children Act. Although all major aspects of PL 94-142--Least Restrictive Environment, Due Process procedures, IEPs, and parent involvement--were identified as problematic for rural schools, three primary hindering factors were identified: (1) teacher retention and recruitment problems, (2) rural attitudinal problems, and (3) problems based on rural geography. These problems were found to emanate from tradition-bound rural environments and to be exacerbated by geographic and climatic demands of remote, isolated areas. This initial study is being followed by a study identifying interrelated effective and cost-efficient service delivery strategies and community and district subtypes.

NATIONAL RESEARCH IDENTIFYING PROBLEMS IN IMPLEMENTING COMPREHENSIVE SPECIAL EDUCATION PROGRAMMING IN RURAL AREAS

Introduction

Sixty-seven percent (67%) of all United States schools are rural, and the majority of unserved and underserved handicapped children are located in rural America (Sher, 1978; Education of the Handicapped, June 6, 1979).

Traditional problems associated with implementing comprehensive special education programs in urban districts are compounded in rural areas. Vast land areas, scattered populations, and lack of services for low-incidence handicapping conditions have become obstacles for the development of special programs requiring highly trained personnel and specialized facilities and equipment.

Failure to acknowledge differences between rural and urban education has frequently led to inappropriate applications of urban service delivery models in rural settings. In addition, the small amount of information available regarding rural special education has generally been idiosyncratic to a particular rural subculture, district or state structure. Because there has been almost no systematic data gathering by federal or other national agencies within rural districts, there has been a tendency to extrapolate information about very divergent districts or states to other rural subcultures (Education of the Handicapped, June 6, 1979).

For decades, state legislators and professional educators sought to ameliorate the problems of rural schools by making them larger through consolidation and reorganization. Although such widespread efforts markedly reduced the number of one-room schools and small districts, problems such as those mentioned above were not significantly impacted.

There is no doubt that initiating comprehensive programming in rural areas necessitates creative utilization of scarce professional and other resources. While most of the objectives held for exceptional children in rural areas are similar to those determined relevant and meaningful for their urban counterparts, the means by which these similar ends are to be met differ widely between the dichotomous settings of city and country.

Many of the problems in effecting change in rural school districts have stemmed from the fact that "innovators" have been external entities directing the small school to change without (1) surveying strengths as well as weaknesses and assessing characteristics of the community and district, and (2) realizing the necessity to individualize service delivery strategies with respect to particular community and district characteristics. In fact, most literature addressing rural service delivery systems and strategies has assumed equivalent resources and other district abilities, regardless of district size, to implement a continuum of services. When it is understood that rural schools range in enrollment from one to 2,500 children and they are located in geographical districts incorporating from less than 50 people to 50,000 citizens (National Center for Educational Statistics definition), the diversity in district structures becomes apparent.

The National Rural Research and Personnel Preparation Project (NRP), was funded to nationally investigate state and local education

agencies to determine problems and effective strategies for effectively and efficiently implementing PL 94-142. The NRP received funds from the Bureau of Education for the Handicapped (BEH) to develop Profiles of effective special education delivery systems and strategies given specific rural community and district subculture characteristics. Profiles will be based on systematic data-gathering techniques. Each Profile will interrelate (1) community characteristics (e.g., low socioeconomic status community 250 miles from diagnostic specialists), and (2) school district characteristics (e.g., regular class teachers apprehensive about mainstreaming, lack of administrative support, lack of speech therapist, etc.) to (3) viable service delivery options demonstrated to be viable in other LEAs having similar characteristics.

This article reports rural special education delivery system problems identified during Phase I of the four-phase National Rural Project. The total efforts of Phase I, conducted during 1978-79 as a BEH Special Project, focused on identifying facilitating and hindering factors which operate to determine the success or failure of rural local education agency (LEA) compliance with PL 94-142. Phase I involved a study of 19 state education agencies (SEAs).

Phase II, conducted in 1979-80, involves an investigation of 80 rural school districts and cooperatives throughout the United States. This phase culminates in the development of the Profiles interrelating effective service delivery strategies and particular community and district characteristics. Cost analysis data is being gathered regarding each effective service delivery strategy identified.

Phase III (1980), involves using Phase I and II data to develop interdisciplinary models of personnel preparation for effective service

delivery to rural subcultures. Phase IV (1980-81) includes field-testing and dissemination of personnel preparation models for use in pre- and in-service training.

Method

1. Comprehensive Literature Reviews

Intensive literature reviews have been conducted and continually updated regarding rural special education delivery system problems and solutions.

Relevant items were analyzed so that effective strategies and practices could be coded and categorized in a manner consistent with the project's Phase II objective of profiling strategies within the framework of school district and community subcultures. The literature review also served as a basis for determining what information should be obtained from SEAs across the country to ascertain facilitating and hindering factors for effective implementation of PL 94-142.

2. Collaboration With Other National Projects and Organizations Concerned With Rural Special Education

Extensive collaboration existed between the NRP and all major national organizations concerned with special education, rural education, and other aspects of rural life. Such collaboration was used to gain input for data gathering processes including instrument development and field-testing. Initial data collection procedures also involved visitations with State Plan Officers of the BEH Division of Assistance to States and several representatives of the BEH Division of Personnel Preparation. Annual plans and program administrative reviews, compliance interview guides, and other BEH compliance forms and processes were reviewed.

3. Data Collection from State Education Agency Personnel

Given budget limitations, the project was able to work with 19 (38%) of the nation's state education agencies (SEAs) during 1978-79. Using comprehensive literature review data, collaboration with other national groups, and the field-test processes described below, state sampling procedures were designed to include major geographic, cultural, and socioeconomic lifestyles in the United States.

The primary SEA data collection vehicle was a formal questionnaire and interviewing process. Initial contact was made with each state's chief school officer, although interviewees included state directors of special education and their staff. In 14 states,data were gathered on-site in state education agency offices. Data were collected in conference sites or by mail in five other states.

The project questionnaire focused on ascertaining problems and successful strategies of complying with each of the four major aspects of PL 94-142--Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), procedural safeguards, and parental participation--in a rural culture. Representatives of LEAs, SEAs, and institutions of higher education from eight states reviewed drafts of the survey instrument. In addition, reactions were received from BEH State Plan Officers and staff of national rural and special education organizations.

The following items represent the portions of the questionnaire in which SEA personnel were asked to describe problems of rural LEAs or cooperatives in their states attempting to implement PL 94-142. (Complete questionnaire items and data analysis are available upon request.)

1. Describe cultural and socioeconomic patterns and lifestyles inhibiting full implementation of PL 94-142.

2. Identify geographic and climatic factors preventing full implementation of PL 94-142.

3. Describe difficulties of LEAs in implementing PL 94-142 and reasons for such difficulties. Identify relationships of these difficulties to cultural, geographic, or socio-economic patterns discussed earlier.

4. State the average annual attrition rate of special education staff.

SEA personnel were requested to adopt the following definition of "rural:"

> A district or cooperative is identified as rural when the number of inhabitants is less than 150 per square mile or when located in counties with 60% or more of the population living in communities no larger than 5,000 inhabitants. Districts with more than 10,000 students and those within a Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area (SMSA), as determined by the U.S. Census Bureau, are not considered rural.

Results

Data provided a broad perspective of issues currently affecting rural LEAs and cooperatives attempting to implement comprehensive special education programming. State officials reported the highest degree of difficulty in three main categories: (1) staffing problems, (2) attitudinal variables, and (3) problems based on rural geography.

As Table 1 indicates, a preponderance of data (94%) indicated that recruiting and retaining qualified staff to educate handicapped children were major problems for rural LEAs. Attendant cultural and geographic factors were serious service delivery inhibitors as 88% of all states reported "LEA resistance to change," 72% "suspicion of outside interference," and 83% "long distances between schools and services" as prominent problems.

Additionally, a majority of states described other factors closely associated with rural culture including resistance to change, isolated/difficult terrain, and fiscal problems. For example, "icy, muddy roads"

(66%), "mountainous areas" (61%), cultural differences (66%), and "low tax bases" (55%).

Clearly, rural cultural factors such as conservatism and suspicion of outside interference combined with long distances to travel under adverse circumstances created serious problems in recruiting and retaining qualified personnel. Sparse populations and resistance to change exacerbated problems of rural special education delivery systems. Poverty and low tax bases further inhibited full service delivery to handicapped students--particularly culturally different special needs students, even though geographic variations of this trend were identified.

The remainder of this article will describe significant data collected regarding major SEA-identified problems in implementing effective special education delivery systems in rural areas. Data are clustered by cultural, geographic/climatic, socioeconomic, and "other" inhibiting factors regarding implementation of PL 94-142 in rural schools. 1. Cultural Factors

Language barriers. Eight states (44%) reported that language differences among population subcultures hindered implementation of PL 94-142. This item was checked by six of the seven states surveyed in the northwest and by one in both the southwest and mid-America region. Surprisingly, even though culturally different groups with diverse languages exist in the northeast and southeast, this item was not reported to be a problem by any of the states surveyed in these regions.

Language differences had greatest impacts on the capacity of local districts to obtain assessment personnel able to speak the appropriate

language. It also affected the quality of interaction between the school and the parents of the handicapped students.

Cultural differences. Sixty-six percent of the schools reported that cultural differences created barriers for local school districts attempting to fully implement PL 94-142. Although this problem was identified across regions, it was found in only one state in the mid-American region (where populations tend to be more homogeneous).

Degrees of difficulty in responding to cultural differences were found to vary considerably. One state in the northwest region, for example, had several pockets of a population subculture which tended to be a community organized system in which decisions were made on a community basis. In such communities it was often necessary for educational personnel to deal with a large portion of the entire community in order to explain and implement appropriate special education programs. As the population did not use electronic equipment, educational programs were unable to use "typical" audiovisual instructional equipment.

Another variation on the impact of cultural differences was the fact that many cultures did not place the same value on education as that of the majority population. Consequently, it was much more difficult for school districts to identify and plan for children in such cultures.

As many handicapped children were able to perform acceptable and productive roles in their subculture without the benefit of special education programs, they were not perceived as "handicapped" by their culture. However, as they were mainstreamed into larger microcosms of the American society, they often faced seemingly insurmountable barriers.

Generally, the presence of culturally different populations made it difficult to hire staff who possessed the minority language and were

sensitive to the needs and nature of the subculture. Personnel with these characteristics plus appropriate certification credentials were unavailable in many areas.

Resistance to change. Resistance to change was reported a major inhibitor by 16 of the 19 SEAs (88%) queried. This problem was identified by all states except two from the northwest.

In a vast majority of cases, residents of rural areas clearly value tradition. In addition, SEA personnel reported a general suspicion of "innovations" and a reluctance to change practices without clear demonstrations that a change would in fact be better than what existed.

SEA descriptions of this trait in practice ranged from attitudinal problems with school administrators toward Least Restrictive Environment concepts to a general hesitancy in the community to adopt changes which were perceived as imposed by external forces (e.g., PL 94-142). In some states it was reported that local districts had refused flow-through funds rather than adjust programs to meet the requirements of PL 94-142 and Section 504 of the 1975 Amendments to the 1973 Vocational Rehabilitation Act.

This "Management by Tradition" approach was discerned to have serious ramifications for potential system alterations. For example, severely handicapped students in rural areas have typically been served in out-of-district programs. Post-PL 94-142 attempts to serve these students in local schools have generally been met with vocal concerns that they could not be served as well in the local district. These responses were determined to reflect feelings of inadequacy of school staff previously told they could not effectively serve such children.

School board members, administrators, educational staff, and parents were reported to exhibit resistance to change. As traditional decision-making, values, and operations were perceived as having been established in the best interest of the children, efforts to alter these processes were consequently met with a great deal of resistance.

Economic class differences. Nine of the SEAs (50%) reported that economic class differences placed some degree of restriction on rural school abilities to fully implement PL 94-142. This problem was distributed across all regions. Although the importance of the problem varied from one region to another, in the southeast all states identified this problem, whereas only one of eight states in the northwest indicated that it was problematic.

The predominant factor identified was economic class differences regarding values placed upon educating handicapped students. It was reported that some LEA cultures did not favor expenditures for individuals whom they did not feel would be productive in the long term. An additional mitigating factor was the existence of economically deprived parents of handicapped children who had more immediate subsistence concerns than the education of their children. As a result, many LEA personnel reportedly were frustrated by these parents who would or could not pay the same degree of attention to their children's educational program as do some parents in higher income groups.

In spite of the fact that this problem was identified by 50% of the states, SEA officials generally did not believe this item affected large numbers of children. However, they did feel that this information should be considered when developing community information forums and outreach programs. For example, common by-products of economic class or

cultural differences were reported to be difficulty generating sufficient local program support and reluctance by some parents to identify their handicapped children as needing services.

2. Geographic and Climatic Inhibiting Factors

Marginal roads. Marginal roads were reported by 44% of all SEAs as causing serious problems inhibiting the provision of full educational services to handicapped children. Although inadequate roads were not reported as major problems in the southeast or southwest, they were identified as a major problem in the northwest and as problematic to a lesser degree in the northeast and mid-America regions.

In many instances, the impact directly affected itinerant staff more than handicapped children. Poor road conditions added to the travel time required to move from one assignment to another. Consequently, units of actual service were determined to cost more under such conditions than in areas where roads were not as obstreperous.

Mountainous areas; icy, muddy roads. Sixty-one percept of all SEAs reported that mountainous areas negatively affected full service delivery. Sixty-six percent indicated that icy, muddy roads negatively impacted full service. Icy, muddy roads and problems caused by mountainous areas were present in all regions except the southwest.

As with marginal roads, these factors contributed to higher costs per unit of service. In addition, they were directly responsible in many instances for disrupting continuity of (already inadequate) services and contributing to long delays in delivery of assessment and evaluation procedures.

One state in the northwest, for example, reported frequent instances in which staff were unable to travel for several days during

the school year due to inclement weather. This not only proved costly but reduced the amount of time available to other service delivery sites.

Another state in the northwest reported instances such as a mountain slide which blocked the road for two months and then added 300 miles to the distance required to obtain special education services.

Although these conditions negatively impacted total educational systems in these areas, special education services were more severely affected, especially when services were provided outside of the district or on an itinerant basis.

Long distances between schools and services. By far the most serious problem in this cluster identified by SEAs was the prevalence of long distances between rural schools and special education services. Fourteen states (79%) reported this as a critical factor. This problem was compounded in schools with insufficient numbers of handicapped students to financially justify employing full-time special education staff or consultants. SEAs reported that service delivery currently involved either long bus rides for handicapped students or an unusual amount of travel time by itinerant specialists. The first alternative in practice had serious implications in light of the Least Restrictive Environment requirement of PL 94-142, and use of the second alternative raised questions in many instances concerning the appropriateness of sporadically delivered services.

No state reported completely satisfactory solutions to such problems. Some rural schools had utilized paraprofessionals to implement programs developed and supervised by certified staff. However, state officials in many cases voiced serious concern about the adequacy of

such services because of the level of paraprofessional training and the lack of meaningful regular supervision. Also, the salaries received by paraprofessionals in many instances were not sufficient to attract persons well suited to make the ideal commitments to handicapped students.

3. Socioeconomic Factors

Low tax base. Ten SEAs (55%) reported that low tax bases had some impact on rural district abilities to deliver full services Inequities in state tax laws, school financing, and distribution of funds were reportedly present. These problems were distributed across all regions. In some states it was felt this would be corrected in the near future, as deficiencies in state funding formulae were being corrected. In other instances, rapid growth in population because of frequent transient industrial development made it difficult for local districts to fund programs.

Phase II processes include obtaining more LEA data to determine whether this item is of significant impact in implementing full special education service. It is possible that the "tax revolt attitude" currently prevalent in the United States was a greater contributor to inadequate funding than the tax base itself.

Suspicion of external (federal and state) interference. Suspicion of "outside interference" was identified as a major problem in all regions. Seventy-two percent of all SEAs surveyed reported that this attitude contributed to difficulties in implementing PL 94-142. In the northeast, people reportedly had long exhibited pride in self-sufficiency. In the west, strong feelings of resentment toward federal bureaucracy prevailed. In fact, western states were becoming increasingly upset over federal ownership of large amounts of their land and

regulations concerning land use. In some areas of the northeast, local districts had refused flow-through funds in order to avoid federal monitoring. It was reported that in spite of this fact, LEAs were meeting legislative requirements.

Suspicion of external interference is closely related to the earlier reported item, resistance to change. Many rural areas are proud of their traditions and perceive mandated changes as threats to their ability to control their own destiny. It was reported that such suspicions are sometimes more strongly held by school officials and board members than rural citizens in general. Ironically, in this instance, externally mandated changes should include more active participation by parents and community groups in the development of educational services for handicapped children. However, some SEAs reported difficulties appropriately increasing their monitoring roles as per PL 94-142 because of suspicion regarding external mandates.

Migrant employment. Six SEAs (33%) in four of the five regions reported that migrant employment inhibited rural schools' abilities to deliver full service. While states had taken measures to account for migrant children and although one state reported that PL 94-142 had forced SEAs and LEAs to be more generally accountable in serving handicapped migrant children, the six states indicated that considerable difficulties existed in tracking migrant children for service delivery as they move from site to site. Program continuity was reported to be a serious problem.

In some western states, heavy development of energy resources had resulted in temporary influxes of workers and placed acute demands on LEAs for service delivery. School districts had been reluctant to seek

new funds for programs which may not be necessary in the future and services in some such areas were extremely inadequate.

Difficulty recruiting and retaining qualified staff. Only one state from the northwest reported no difficulty attracting and retaining qualified staff. Of the states participating in the study, 94% indicated this was a major factor in implementing full services to handicapped children.

Many state officials expressed serious doubts that this problem could be solved without modification of current certification regulations. Social isolation, extreme weather conditions, inadequate housing, and low salaries created conditions which made it most difficult to employ special education staff in many rural schools. Many positions remained unfilled for months and others for years.

Many rural special education staff who were hired were young and inexperienced. Social and cultural isolation reportedly encouraged most of these teachers to abandon the rural schools as soon as openings occurred in more urban settings. Some states estimated an annual teacher turnover of 30-50% with almost complete turnover every three years. Attrition rates such as these had serious ramifications for personnel development and program stability.

Under these conditions, it was reported that personnel development, difficult enough in rural areas given a stable personnel force, seldom reached beyond basic orientation to district and state philosophies. Constant turnover rendered it virtually impossible to develop and implement long-range plans for staff improvement. High attrition was reported to necessitate re-initiation of personnel development each year or every two years.

4. Other Difficulties Reported in Implementing PL 94-142 in Rural Areas

The most frequently mentioned additional area of difficulty was provision of a continuum of services for implementation of Least Restrictive Environment concepts, IEP development, and insuring parental involvement and procedural safeguards. These aspects related directly to all four major dimensions of PL 94-142. Hence, once again it was emphatically clear that rural LEAs were experiencing considerable problems in implementing PL 94-142 effectively.

Difficulty implementing Least Restrictive Environment requirements in rural schools was reportedly due to paradoxes of problems encountered in urban schools. Historically, it has been typical for rural schools to serve mildly handicapped children in regular classroom settings due to lack of segregated settings. In most instances, the major problem in doing so was lack of consistent itinerant and resource help. However, programs for moderately and severely handicapped children were not commonly found in rural schools. The traditional pattern has been to place such students in state or regional facilities.

Concerted emphasis on returning many of these institutionalized children to their local communities has often highlighted an abyss of local services. Part of the problem has been related to school and community attitudes. Parents have grown comfortable with their children being placed outside the home, and school boards and administrators have been fearful that local schools cannot provide adequate services. To adequately serve a population which has previously been served elsewhere requires additional staff trained to meet specific needs and/or additional training to upgrade the skills of existing staff.

In addition, although PL 94-142 specifically states that IEPs are to be developed by an interdisciplinary committee, many rural districts

have been assigning this responsibility to the special education teacher(s) in the district or to a district counselor; and professional placement decisions have frequently been "rubber stamped" by parents. This not only inhibited the effectiveness of the education of the child but impacted attitudes in a negative way regarding the "burden" of special education.

Most rural areas did not have local chapters of parent-oriented organizations such as the Association for Retarded Citizens (ARC) and the Association for Children with Learning Disabilities (ACLD). Although most rural schools had provided for parental participation to meet the requirements of PL 94-142, state officials commonly pointed out that parental involvement in rural areas lacked meaningful advocacy aspects (the intent of PL 94-142).

Typical perceptions of schools by rural parents have been that school personnel are the experts and know what is best for students. Thus, they have tended to play a passive role in the educational process including IEP development meetings. Reportedly, many parents of handicapped students have been inclined to be most agreeable to any kind of service provided for their children whether appropriate or not.

Some state agencies have developed and implemented parent training programs coordinated on a regional basis. Local schools were reported to be reluctant to enter into this arena because of fear that lawsuits and hearings will interfere with their general school operation. Emphasis on potential positive outcomes including effective parent/school partnerships have not been perceived.

Many state officials reported that serious efforts needed to be made to ensure that procedural safeguard requirements were in policy and

in practice. Many rural schools have operated on an extremely informal basis with respect to record keeping and disciplinary measures. Additional inservice and assistance in procedural safeguard requirements were reported by state education officials as critical needs.

Discussion and Conclusions

Collaborative developmental and field-test efforts described above were made by the project to include a sample of major economic, geographic and cultural lifestyles in the 50 states of the United States. Budgetary constraints limited the number of SEAs queried to 19. As non-participating states may vary in terms of their educational practices and procedures, caution must be exercised in assuming that data reported in this document are accurate reflections of special education practices and problems in states which were not surveyed.

Unfortunately, all major aspects of PL 94-142--Least Restrictive Environment, Due Process procedures, IEPs, and parent involvement were problematic for rural LEAs. However, all states surveyed were making serious and good-faith attempts to assist rural districts develop and implement programs for handicapped children. Furthermore, SEA officials reported encouragement from their internal studies of LEA accomplishments since 1975 although cognizant of the many challenges yet to be mastered.

There is no question that the greatest obstacles to full, appropriate services for handicapped rural students were difficulties in recruiting and retaining qualified staff and in providing appropriate inservice on a continuous basis. A November 1979 study randomly mailed to rural LEA administrators who receive the nationally disseminated NRP Newsletter confirmed these SEA identified needs at the local district level. Questionnaire respondents reiterated teacher retention, recruit-

ment and professional development for effective mainstreaming as paramount problems of rural LEAs attempting to implement PL 94-142.

These problems exist in tradition-bound rural environments, and are exacerbated by geographic and climatic demands of rural, remote, and isolated areas. Attitudinal problems clearly hindered service delivery in some cases, and often prolonged the period of time required to make programmatic changes. State officials were not only aware of and working on these problems but appeared to welcome assistance.

PROBLEMS IDENTIFIED BY SEAs

n = 19

Type of Problem	Percent of States
Difficulty Recruiting Qualified Staff	*94%
Difficulty Retaining Qualified Staff	*94%
Resistance to Change	*88%
Long Distances Between Schools	*83%
Suspicion of Outside Interference	*72%
Cultural Differences	*66%
Icy, Muddy Roads	*66%
Mountainous Areas	61%
Low Tax Base	*55%
Economic Class Differences	50%
Language Barriers	44%
Marginal Roads	44%
Migrant Employment	33%
Air Transportation Required	22%
Mining Employment	22%
High Unemployment	17%
Fishing Employment	11%
Timber Employment	11%
Farm Employment	11%
High Level of Poverty	11%
Water Transportation Required	6%
Family Size	6%

* Predominant Problem Area

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